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The Sure Start Journey

A Summary of Evidence

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Ministerial Foreword



Every child has a right to the best possible start in life. Every child has the right to the opportunity to achieve their full potential. No child should find that poverty dictates their future success and prevents them from unlocking their talents. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that this becomes the reality. Our recently published Children's Plan encapsulates these aims and our underlying aspirations for world class early year's provision. Sure Start is integral to this aspiration, since supporting every child and providing the help which parents need,

especially for the most disadvantaged, is the Sure Start concept. It is one of the biggest successes of this Government. And it is one I am proud to be involved with.

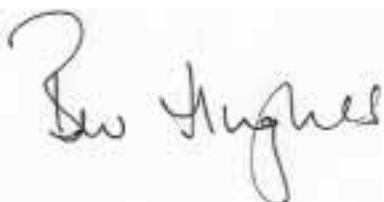
We have already come a long way on the Sure Start journey to improve the outcomes for every child and to reduce inequalities. It is a journey which has seen us make exciting progress. We are on track to meet our 2008 target of 2,500 Sure Start Children's Centres and are heading towards one centre for every community – 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres – by 2010. But we know that, whilst a major achievement, this is just the start.

How far we have come is best illustrated through the wealth of research available. This document brings together that research to provide a picture of where we are and what has been achieved, whilst also highlighting the challenges which we must overcome during the next stages of our journey to be successful in realising the Sure Start vision.

You will see that research has been an integral and essential part of the process so far. We have invested in it in order to learn from experience and remain on track for success. We have listened carefully to the findings from the National Evaluation of Sure Start, and acted on its recommendations, most notably to ensure we are reaching out and engaging with the most disadvantaged children and families.

I am deeply committed to the use of evidence to help guide the next phase of the Sure Start journey. In reading this document you will see for yourself what the evidence is telling us. I hope that the findings and themes will resonate with you and provide you with ideas for moving forward work in your own centres.

Working together I am confident that we can achieve our ambitions for every child and ensure they grow up in an environment where poverty and disadvantage do not hamper their aspirations. The Sure Start journey continues, and I look forward to seeing what more we can now achieve.



Chapter 1: Introduction

Poverty blights children's lives and has no place in our society. This Government has made huge progress in tackling child poverty but we recognise that much more needs to be done. Sure Start is at the heart of our commitment to eradicating child poverty and unlocking the talents and abilities of every single child, giving families new opportunities and aspirations, and improving outcomes for all children.

Since 1997 we have made enormous progress in building a new infrastructure of early years' services. The first step was setting up over 500 Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), offering a range of integrated services – health, early learning and family support – to children under four and their families in the most disadvantaged areas. Those early SSLPs continue to play an important role in tackling social exclusion and improving outcomes for the poorest children and families. Their work is really valued by the local communities and families that use them. And as a society, we all benefit when all families and communities are strong and cohesive.

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We are now making rapid progress in enabling all communities to benefit from the Sure Start approach as Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs) open across the country, building on the early success of SSLPs. With over 2,000 SSCCs now up and running, we are on track to achieve our target of 2,500 this year, increasing to 3,500, or one for every community, by 2010. Sure Start Children's Centres are central to the Government's vision for giving all children the best start in life, enabling them

to reach their potential and narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their better off peers.

Sure Start has pioneered an integrated approach to children's services, bringing services together around the needs of children and families. As such, the programme foreshadowed many of the objectives of the wider Every Child Matters (ECM) reform of children's services and from 2003/4 Sure Start has been central to the delivery of the five ECM outcomes. Together with extended schools and working within the wider strategic framework provided by children's trusts at local authority level, SSCCs offer a new universal service for all children and families while keeping a clear focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged.

As we move forward to achieving universal, permanent provision through SSCCs, we are fortunate to be able to draw on the rich evidence base provided by the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS). One of the largest Government funded evaluation programmes, NESS is providing ongoing important lessons about what works in improving outcomes and has also given us invaluable information on where and how the Sure Start programme can be improved. One clear message has been the importance of reaching out to all families, especially the most disadvantaged, and to ensure that parents and children are offered the highest quality and most effective services. We are strongly committed to ensuring that policy and practice is fully informed by the best available evidence, and that messages from research are shared with practitioners and managers and built upon.

This document is intended to help centre leaders with that task. It provides a summary of the main headlines from the Sure Start research programme, together with findings from other key reports and evaluations, structured around high level policy themes. As such, it highlights the emerging success stories and key challenges, together with case studies under each of our headings. There is much here to celebrate, as well as to learn from, and a wealth of evidence that Sure Start Children’s Centres really are making a difference for children and families. Since tackling child poverty is everyone’s problem, and tackling it needs to be everyone’s business, there is also much highlighted here that we need to do.

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Chapter 2: The Sure Start Journey

Sure Start grew out of the recognition that deprivation was blighting the lives of too many children and families in disadvantaged areas. There was growing evidence that multiple disadvantage was becoming inter-generational, with the risk of poor outcomes and social exclusion becoming a legacy passed from parents to children. Children from such backgrounds were more likely to be at risk of damagingly poor outcomes and very restricted life chances.

To address these issues, the Government undertook a crosscutting review of services for children and young people in 1997 as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Taking the challenge of tackling long-standing effects of deprivation and social exclusion as a starting point, the Review looked into the provision of services, including those in the most disadvantaged areas. The Review also considered international evidence from programmes like Head Start and the Perry Pre-School Programme in the United States, as well as experimental programmes already underway in this country.

As well as confirming the devastating effects of multiple deprivation embedded over generations, the Review concluded that:

- The quality of service provision for young children and their families varied enormously across localities and districts, with uncoordinated and patchy services being the norm in many areas.
- Services were particularly dislocated for the under fours – an age group neglected prior to 1997.

The Review recommended setting up a programme called 'Sure Start', aimed at improving the health and well-being of children from birth to four and their families in the most deprived areas. With its focus on tackling disadvantage, its determination to engage parents and communities in shaping integrated services around the needs of the local community, and with the financial investment to support this, Sure Start was a revolution both in service delivery and in its ambition for long term social change. The commitment was also long term: the evidence of improvements in children's wellbeing, in parent's capacity to promote that wellbeing and in family's quality of life would take time to come through.

Sure Start Local Programmes varied according to local needs but supported children and their families by offering a range of integrated services including early education, childcare, health and family support in specified geographical areas. Reflecting the revolution in service delivery, SSLPs were run by local partnerships including voluntary and community organisations, practitioners from health, social services, education, and local parents. They pioneered different ways of working with deprived communities. Providers worked together to cut across old professional and agency boundaries and focused more successfully on identifying, and then meeting, the needs of children, of families and of communities.

The original target was to establish 250 Sure Start Local Programmes by March 2002, starting with ‘trailblazer’ programmes set up during 1999 and 2000. In 2000 this was expanded so that more families could benefit. By the end of 2003, 524 Sure Start Local Programmes had been set up in the most disadvantaged areas.

The Transition to Sure Start Children’s Centres: A New Universal Service

Drawing on the learning generated by Sure Start Local Programmes, the Government decided from 2003 to move towards a national programme of Sure Start Children’s Centres offering a universal, mainstream service for children under five and families. The *Ten Year Childcare Strategy* (HM Treasury) published in 2004 announced a target of 3,500 Children’s Centres by 2010, that is one for every community.

The principles behind this transition were underpinned by *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (November 2004) which set out a national framework for local change in services for children, young people and families. It stressed the paramount importance of a focus on early intervention, and co-operation between all services and agencies involved with the health and welfare of children. Working within a local authority framework meant that SSCCs remained at the heart of their communities yet benefited from a wider, strategic approach to supporting children and families. The Childcare Act 2006 gave statutory force to a number of the key commitments in the Ten Year Strategy, including placing a duty on local authorities to improve the outcomes of all children under five and to close the gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers.

As a universal service, SSCCs face a number of key challenges. They need a thorough understanding of their local community and their role within it as part of the broader fabric of local children’s services. Centres must remain responsive to the needs of their communities while at the same time ensuring that a core offer of services shown to work is available. Personalisation should be a defining feature in planning services and in the practice found everyday in SSCCs. Central government also has its role to play and the continuing importance of SSCCs as a core part of improving outcomes for children and their families, particularly the most disadvantaged, is confirmed by the recently produced Children’s Plan. Central government will continue to give centres the support which they need but also recognises the need to allow local areas the freedom to make decisions, to support their capacity and capability in doing so, while remaining confident that high-quality services are being delivered nationally.

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Chapter 3: The National Evaluation of Sure Start

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was commissioned in early 2001. In commissioning NESS, Government was clearly demonstrating its commitment to ensuring that the Sure Start programme was informed by detailed, robust and independent research. The impact of research, especially NESS, can clearly be seen in the ways in which the Sure Start journey has developed and changed over time.

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NESS was designed to tell us what worked for which children, families and communities, how and in what circumstances, both in the short and medium term. Unsurprisingly, given the scale of Sure Start, it has used a variety of strategies to study the hugely diverse first 260 Sure Start Local Programmes.

To date 26 reports have been published all of which can be accessed via the National Evaluation website at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk.

The most recent NESS evaluation, *The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning* (March 2008), provides us with the latest information available on the development of the Sure Start journey. For three-year olds in the study and their families, the evaluation has found that SSLPs have made impacts on several of the outcomes investigated, a marked improvement on the findings of the earlier cross-sectional study published in 2005.

Parents of three-year-old children now show less negative parenting and provide their children with a better home learning environment. Three-year-old children in SSLP areas display better social development with higher levels of positive social behaviour and independence/self-regulation. These SSLP effects appear to be a consequence of the SSLP benefits upon parenting. Three-year-old children in SSLP areas have higher immunisation rates and fewer accidental injuries than children in similar areas without a SSLP (though it is possible these last two effects could reflect a difference in time measurement). Families living in SSLP areas use more child- and family-related services than those living elsewhere.

The report states that it is reasonable to conclude that both longer exposure to SSLPs, and the continued development of such programmes in response to the growing body of evidence, has been responsible for the more positive results. The report also provides pointers for the future

development of policy, for example, in terms of an increased focus within centres on speech and language development.

What other research is available?

In addition to NESS we have drawn on three other main sources of evidence:

- The *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project* (EPPE) examines the effect of pre-school education for three and four year olds on children’s development at key ages. EPPE found that involvement in high-quality early years education from age two onwards can lead to better educational and social outcomes for all children. It shows that outcomes can be improved for all children whilst children from disadvantaged backgrounds can close the attainment gap on their peers.
- The National Audit Office report, *Sure Start Children’s Centres*, in December 2006 reviewed their ability to monitor their own performance, reach the most disadvantaged and deliver value for money, with results that strongly reinforce the findings from NESS.
- Ofsted recently published *How well are they doing: The impact of Children’s Centres and Extended Schools* (Jan 2008). The report offers a positive view on the sometimes “life-changing” impact of SSCCs on children and parents, as well as reinforcing the conclusions about outreach and the need to embed performance management.

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Chapter 4: Exploring the key themes from the research

The following chapter highlights the research findings from NESS, and other sources, according to the key themes most pertinent to centre leaders. Since the research under each heading has been derived from a considerable number of sources, a box at the end of each section points out where further information can be found. For a more detailed discussion of the individual projects, please see the full reports listed in the bibliography.

As some of the research referred to within this section pre-dates the transition to Sure Start Children's Centres, the terminology "Sure Start Local Programmes" (SSLP) is used where appropriate to reflect the terminology within the report. Many of these Sure Start Local Programmes will now, however, have become Sure Start Children's Centres and the messages which follow also apply to these settings. In reading the following section centre leaders are therefore encouraged to apply the observations made to their own centres, since the messages remain valid.

4.1 Promoting good outcomes for children

Context

Sure Start Children's Centres provide access to integrated early years services that are central to helping children's development and to narrowing the gap in children's outcomes associated with disadvantage. No child should miss out on the advantages that the responsive and respectful service delivery approach in SSCCs can bring.

Research

International research evidence clearly shows that investment in high-quality early years education and care leads to better child outcomes later in life including improved intellectual, social and emotional development. In particular the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report* (2004) has shown that good quality childcare and early education, as well as home learning, gives children a head start in primary school, by supporting better behaviour and educational development, and later reports show that these benefits can continue.

According to Ofsted's 2006 report, *Extended Services in Schools and Children's Centres*, in good settings, links were developed between early year's education, play and childcare so that there were consistent strategies for managing children's behaviour and play. The most recent report from Ofsted, *How well are they doing: The Impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools*

(Jan 2008), states that over three quarters of the children's centres inspected provided good or better services, with all the sample integrating early education and childcare very effectively. In 23 of the 30 SSCCs visited, children's progress was at least good in the sessions inspectors observed, although centres were not monitoring effectively the impact of their provision on children's longer-term development. The NESS report *The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes* (2005) includes a checklist for improving quality in services which reminds leaders to observe and record each child's development to ensure their needs are being met. A focus on emotional and social development is not enough and centres must also look to develop further child development in other areas, in particular, speech and language.

According to the earlier NESS research, in their early learning experience children in SSLPs had some support for speech and language, and emotional development, as well as extra opportunities for physical activity and literacy. However, it is clear from some NESS reports (e.g. *Promoting Speech and Language – a Themed Study in 15 SSLPs* – June 2007) that while some SSLPs are doing good work in relation to children's language development there is considerable scope for greater efforts to ensure all staff and parents realise the importance of the language environment in fostering development in early learning experiences. This is a task which all staff need to take on board to ensure that children are exposed to high-quality stimulation and interaction.

Parents identified learning and socialising as being the main benefits for children attending SSLPs. The most recent research from NESS, *The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning* (March 2008), reports positive effects on child development. The report states that children in programme areas are now beginning to exhibit more positive social behaviour (a construct of 8 child behaviour measures) as well as greater independence/self regulation, than children living in non-SSLP areas.

Programmes had increased the supply of early learning, play and childcare and in many instances had improved its quality. Parents and children were benefiting from shared, fun activities, like sessions of music and movement, drama, storytelling and art and craft, designed to enhance the parent/child relationship. There was also some evidence of mothers having a warmer and more accepting manner towards their children in SSLP areas. In some programmes however there appeared to be insufficient emphasis on children's cognitive development, with the bias being towards support for parents and enhancing the parent-child relationship.

Programmes had used their responsibility to address the needs of children at risk by developing innovative and effective methods of support including informing and supporting communities about the dangers of domestic abuse, modelling non-violent solutions and facilitating cooperative activities. In collaboration with social services, programmes were providing support to 'children in need' and their families and contributing to child protection plans.

Case study: Improving outcomes

A literacy and numeracy officer works alongside the play workers, using role play to encourage literacy and numeracy skills in children – singing, reading, shopping (counting items, numbers on food packs); this encourages parents to acknowledge and value the everyday literacy and numeracy skills they themselves use with their children. The literacy and numeracy officer also operates a ‘story sacks’ service, which allows parents to borrow a storybook, with puppets and other material to enact the story. These activities are seen by staff as important for children in order to encourage interaction with other children, which is seen to be associated with learning and developing basic social skills, independence, confidence, negotiating skills, sharing and learning how to ‘take turns’.

Source: adapted from Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth study. Part two – A close up on services (January 2005)

Best practice on play, childcare, child development and improving outcomes for children can be found in the following publications...

- The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005)
- A Study of the Transition from the Foundation Stage to KS1 (March 2005)
- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Understanding the Contribution of Sure Start Local Programmes to the Task of Safeguarding Children’s Welfare (July 2007)
- Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007)
- Family and Parenting Support in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2007)
- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)

Sources include: The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005), Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007), Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007), Sure Start Children’s Centres Parental Satisfaction Survey Report and Annexes 2007 (June 2007), The Impact of Sure Start on Social Services (May 2005), The Third Implementation of the Sure Start Language Measure (March 2005), The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report (2004), The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning (March 2008), How well are they doing: The impact of Children’s Centres and Extended Schools (Jan 2008)

4.2 Reaching excluded and disadvantaged groups, outreach and home visiting

Context

Some families facing particular challenges may need additional support in order to access services. While these families will not always be in difficulty, research has shown that there is a greater risk that their children will have poor outcomes and limited opportunities. Outreach and home visiting are therefore an essential part of ensuring that all families within the community, including those who cannot or will not come into the Centre, can have an equal chance to benefit from what is being offered.

Research

The National Audit Office publication *Sure Start Children's Centres* (December 2006) reported that most, but not all, the SSCCs it visited were providing some outreach activities, with one third proactively targeting hard to reach groups and working to ensure that services were more relevant to the needs of lone parents, teenage parents and ethnic minorities. However, the report identified that outreach remained a particular challenge for programmes, specifically with regards to improving services for fathers, the parents of children with disabilities, and for ethnic minorities in areas with smaller minority populations. This observation has also been highlighted by the recent Ofsted report *How well are they doing: The impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools* as well as the previous Ofsted report *Extended Services in Schools and Children's Centres*.

The NESS reports demonstrate that programmes have made considerable efforts on outreach, but agree that it is a particularly challenging and time consuming area. Managers sometimes felt that they lacked confidence with regards to reaching out to the most vulnerable, but most agreed that they would, in time, make the entire community aware of their services. They were also aware that outreach was an ongoing activity, not a one-off task.

Important principles underlying effective outreach work include producing a strategy to target those who are hard to reach, developing a detailed understanding of the local community via the local authority and through informal local research / knowledge, communicating with partner organisations to identify those in need, being sensitive to individual circumstances and cultures, and looking to develop a service which addresses the needs of a wide-range of users. Effective methods of outreach include home visiting, moving services closer to users through centrally located buildings and satellite buildings with an accessible, non-threatening atmosphere, the publication of publicity materials, the development of welcome packs, provision of transport services, fun days and events.

Feedback from parents on their engagement with programmes suggests they need a lot of support in leaving their homes to join groups and other services. Within the NESS reports some parents commented positively on the persistence of staff who followed-up periods of non-attendance and enabled families to re-access services. Generally parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with outreach and home visiting services.

In some SSLPs there were instances of services being used most by the families who needed them least. Outreach, home visiting and specialist service development for specific users were used by some programmes to redress the balance.

Case study: Outreach

The Parent Link Scheme is an outreach scheme that aims to reach out to new families in the community and let them know what services are available. Parent Link Workers (PLWs) also work to publicise the setting by taking part in community events and link parents to other activities and sources of support in the area by sharing information and helping them get to groups and participate. They can also provide focused support to parents on any issue impacting on their own or their family's well being, by offering a home visiting support service.

PLWs have helped families find nurseries and sources of support for young children, housing issues, domestic violence, difficulties managing children and problems with neighbours. If necessary, the PLW will attend groups with parents and will arrange appointments with the relevant agency/professional. All cases are reviewed after eight sessions and new objectives will be set if required, or the case will be closed.

Referrals typically come from the health visitor and usually include families who are in some way feeling isolated (recently moved to the area, have few friends with children, experiencing Post Natal Depression, etc.). Some families are difficult to reach and the PLWs have to make several visits to find someone at home. PLWs report that parents are leaving the scheme early, having achieved what they wanted from it.

Source: adapted from Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes – An in-depth study – Part 2 – NESS (January 2005)

Best practice on outreach, access and home visiting can be found in the following publications...

- Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children's Centres (June 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (January 2005)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)
- Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2006)

Sources include: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start (June 2002), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2006), National Audit Office: Sure Start Children's Centres (December 2006), Ofsted: Extended Services in Schools and Children's Centres (July 2006), Ofsted: How well are they doing?: The Impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools (Jan 2008)

i. Families from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Groups

Context

Evidence shows that some minority ethnic groups suffer disproportionately high levels of disadvantage. Local Authorities and SSCCs should be aware of the ethnic composition of their community and adapt their services accordingly to address the needs of everyone in their area.

Research

SSLP experiences and practice varied widely on this topic with some programmes demonstrating a much greater ability to respond to the challenges involved. Barriers could include not having a strategic approach to doing so, lacking sufficient knowledge and experience, or not having consciously targeted particular groups of users.

Reaching out to ethnic groups and creating specialist services brings its own unique challenges. In particular, services reported difficulties in terms of:

- Reaching out to transient populations
- A need for a detailed and accurate knowledge of different cultural practices
- The cost of translation services
- Sensitivity to competing claims that could create ethnic divisions
- The time needed to develop a bond with community groups
- The need to balance particular demands from parents (such as a 'Muslim Mums' group) with the efforts to mix and unite communities
- A need for staff with the knowledge or experiences appropriate to the composition of the area

The most successful work was based on a good understanding of these complexities and a willingness to be flexible in creating and delivering services.

Outreach work and the targeting of services was an essential tool in contacting BME families. Positive messages were sent where parents were used by programmes to offer effective outreach into their own communities as interpreters of materials and as informal reception staff. However, few minority staff tended to be employed in senior positions, which could send a negative message. Greater training, support and mentoring were needed to help BME staff take advantage of opportunities for advancement and promotion. In addition, parental involvement in management processes amongst BME families was often weak, with more support needed. A lack of monitoring also meant the full extent of engagement was not known, and services were not being effectively reviewed to ensure they met varying community needs.

There was evidence that programmes could help to build trust and respect between different communities through bridge-building activities but there was room for more to be done.

Case study: Using events as outreach

In a setting operating in a diverse area with an Outreach Team of seven staff, a programme of summer activities for children was offered. These included: African Caribbean drumming and interactive music; storytelling and toys; along with arts and crafts and music. The Outreach Team collaborated with other local organisations to plan and deliver summer and winter fun-days. The latter might celebrate Eid, Hanukah, Diwali and Christmas. These events were very popular with the community and helped to generate awareness of Sure Start across a broad audience.

The leader notes that in the area: *"There is a gap between cultures. Each culture seems to operate in isolation. To get round this and to try to bring communities together we hold 'international days' for which all communities bring different types of food, and summer trips, where families from different groups enjoy themselves together. But you also need culturally specific events to reach some parents – though it means you won't be bringing them together. We had an information day where the Bengali project worker presented her activities, and the health project gave away fruit and veg at the end. You need to do that."*

Source: adapted from *Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes – NESS (November 2006)*

Best practice on BME engagement can be found in the following publications...

- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (January 2005)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (2006)

Sources include: *Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (2006)*, *Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)*

ii. Working with Disabled Children and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN-D)

Context

Families with disabled children face additional barriers to accessing services. Disabled children should be fully included in all services provided by Sure Start Children's Centres. All disabled children, along with their families, should be able to participate in activities and take part equally alongside their peers.

Research

The research shows that SSLPs varied in the ways they identified and counted special needs and disabilities, but those studied estimated that they were working with between 5 and 120 children in this category, with an average of 40, or 5% of the age group. The highest incidence of need reported was speech delay, followed by behaviour issues, autistic spectrum disorders, development delay, hearing or visual impairment and Down's syndrome.

Programmes also varied as to whether they employed a staff member with expertise in special needs or disabilities, with around half doing so, and the profile they gave to special needs in policies, literature and imagery. The profile tended to be higher when the programme manager or senior staff had personal or professional experience of special needs and disabilities. The parents of children with special needs highlighted this as an area for improvement.

Programmes with particular successes in relation to SEN-D had increased the availability of play and childcare facilities, provided additional sessionals for children with special needs to give them extra developmental opportunities, provided respite for their parents, increased the availability of family and home support and increased access to specialist health services, particularly speech and language therapy and mental health outreach. In doing so they made their facilities accessible, inclusive and well-equipped. Joined-up services led to quicker, more appropriate responses for families and the development of a preventative approach.

Parents of children with SEN-D were particularly positive about the friendly, non-judgemental, knowledgeable staff within programmes, to which they could turn in times of high pressure. They appreciated that staff were interested in the whole family and that programmes provided a place where they could get high-quality help and support, as well as an opportunity to see their child happy, coping well and making friends.

More generally, there was evidence that programmes had influenced other providers, like childminders and local playgroups, to be committed to equal opportunities and inclusive services, and to be flexible and responsive to families.

In terms of future improvements the research indicates more work can be done to develop the links between services to enable forward planning and supported transitions and to develop staff skills and confidence.

Case study: Reaching out to families

Lorraine's three year old son, Jason, has severely delayed language and behavioural problems. She did not send him to playgroup because she was worried about how he would behave. He slept poorly, which affected the whole family, and would go all day without speaking a word. A friend put her in touch with Sure Start. The speech and language therapist and clinical psychologist visited for several weeks, doing activities with her and Jason and suggesting things to work on until their next visit. Jason made rapid progress. In Lorraine's words: *"He's just like a totally different child... it's unreal. Nobody believed me, he would go all day without saying nothing, he used to just point to everything and now he just says everything, like everything you say, he'll repeat it!"*

Source: adapted from A Better Start: Children and Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes – NESS (March 2007)

Best practice on SEN-D can be found in the following publications...

- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)

Sources include: A Better Start: Children and Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)

4.3 Support for parents

Context

Sure Start Children's Centres are intended to be the first, local port of call for all families with young children, whether they need advice or support on their child's health, development or care, or help with the challenges parents face every day in bringing up their children in the crucial early years.

The Government is committed to making work pay and to supporting parents to find work, to stay in work and to progress so that they can build sustainable futures for themselves and their families. SSCCs therefore have an important part to play in tackling child poverty by helping parents find training and employment through partnerships with Jobcentre Plus.

Research

The most recent research available from NESS, *The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning* (March 2008), states that parents residing in SSLP areas report making greater use of support services, exhibit less negative parenting (a construct of six parenting variables) and provide their children with a better home learning environment.

Parents appreciated the 'Sure Start vision' particularly in terms of having a voice to shape the provision, the absence of stigma and the availability of a range of high-quality and innovative services that supported them as parents, as well as supporting their children. This was reflected in the *Sure Start Children's Centres Parental Satisfaction Survey Report and Annexes 2007* (June 2007) which noted that parents' levels of satisfaction with individual services was very high. In the overall satisfaction rating that parents gave the SSCC, 90% of parents were very satisfied, with a further 9% who were quite satisfied. Less than 1% of parents were dissatisfied with the SSCC as a whole.

For parents the provision of childcare in SSLPs was increasing their opportunities to work, to volunteer or to undertake training, as well as giving them a break. It was also used as a gateway to introduce parents to the wider services on offer. SSLPs have now become significant employers in their area, employing professionals and members of the local community on a full, part time or sessional basis.

Through effective partnerships with Jobcentre Plus, SSLPs have been able to act as a bridge for parents into the education, training and employment services of other specialist organisations. By emphasising confidence building and raising aspirations, SSLPs have been able to reconcile the sometimes perceived conflict between promoting good parenting and promoting employability. Overall research into changing area characteristics from NESS suggests that less economic deprivation is now being experienced by families with young children in SSLP areas, with fewer children in these areas living in workless households.

There is some evidence to suggest that SSLPs have had an impact on parental feelings of empowerment. Parents expressed the value of programmes in terms of increased confidence, skills, self-esteem as parents, and friendship, as well as closer bonds with their children who they felt were learning more and mixing better. Helping parents to build their confidence and improve their skills could in turn lead to better relationships within the family, and ultimately better outcomes for children.

While programmes tended to offer good support to parents, less was done in terms of support for parenting. Many SSLPs had developed their own parenting programmes, often using elements of evidence-based interventions, but with no guarantee of effective outcomes. In some SSLPs small, sensitive adaptations to meet the needs of local populations (e.g. BME families) were being made appropriately. Parents typically reported that parenting programmes worked well for them, that they felt safe in participating in them and that they liked the structured nature of courses.

In its recent report *How well are they doing: The impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools*, Ofsted commented that the focus on parenting skills within SSCCs and Extended Schools had been successful, especially for the most vulnerable groups, and that these services could have a "life-changing" impact for many parents.

Where parents had frustrations with SSLPs these centred around practical barriers including timing, literacy and communication, location, transport, waiting lists and unexpected charges. Parents who felt staff saw them as 'deprived' were less likely to get involved, and some parents were concerned about services being 'cliquey'.

Case study: Family Action Plans

Family support is the main service offered by a centre in a predominantly Muslim community, with a particularly high level of special needs within the child population. Family support workers use a simple form to agree an Action Plan with parents and later, to review outcomes. The Sure Start worker sits down on an early visit with the parents to complete a one-page form. This includes:

- a checklist identifying the family's main support needs – reflecting 20 services offered by the centre (or by referral), such as play sessions, home safety, behaviour management, parent support, benefits advice, occupational therapy, dietician support or a dental referral;
- a box where they can list other types of support wanted;
- an 'action plan' box asking "how are we going to meet these needs?", to be filled in by the worker in discussion with the parents.

The same questions are revisited after six months, with a section added about outcomes. Parents are asked to indicate their level of satisfaction on a visual scale ranging from a smiling face to an unhappy one, and a box invites them to comment. This is repeated at 9 and 12 months, where support is on a continuing basis. A final box notes whether the case is closed, when it was reviewed, and if further support is required.

Source: adapted from A Better Start: Children and Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes – NESS (March 2007)

Best practice on meeting the needs of parents, including employment, and engagement can be found in the following publications...

- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Variation in Sure Start Local Programmes Effectiveness: Report of the NESS Programme Variability Study (November 2005)
- Improving the Employability of Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2004)
- Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (January 2005)
- Family and Parenting Support in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2007)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)
- Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (2006)

Sources include: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start (June 2002), Getting Sure Start Started (August 2002), Improving the Employability of Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2004), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005), The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Child Development and Family Functioning: A Report on Preliminary Findings (2004), Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (2006), Family and Parenting Support in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2007), National Audit Office report: Sure Start Children's Centres (December 2006), Sure Start Children's Centres Parental Satisfaction Survey Report and Annexes 2007 (June 2007), Ofsted: How well are they doing?: The impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools (Jan 2007), The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning (March 2008)

i. Engaging with fathers

Context

Fathers – whether or not they live with their children – have a crucial role to play in giving their children the best start in life. All Sure Start Children’s Centre services should therefore be responsive to supporting fathers, and in promoting the role of fathering.

Research

Research has shown that when fathers are actively involved with children under the age of seven, there are good results for educational attainment and family relationships both at the teenage stage and in adulthood. As teenagers these children are less likely to be in trouble with the police and as adults they are less likely to be homeless or have mental health problems.

There is however a considerable amount of feedback to suggest that engaging with fathers is an area that programmes find difficult, an observation also supported by the National Audit Office report *Sure Start Children’s Centres*. The NESS reports highlight that staff in the majority of programmes surveyed reported low levels of father involvement in programme activities.

Where fathers did take part it was most likely to be in outdoor, active, fun activities designed specifically for them, and if there was a member of staff with responsibility for their engagement. Such involvement often became a ‘stepping-stone’ for further engagement in a wider range of activities at the centre. Fathers went on to attend services more regularly when they saw a positive benefit to themselves or their children from a service.

Most fathers did feel welcome at programmes, although some found a predominantly female environment excluding. While mothers generally supported the idea of fathers using services and of male staff working in them, there was some evidence of ‘maternal gate-keeping’, where mothers found it difficult to share responsibility for childcare with fathers. Attitudes like this prevented some fathers from taking part. Further barriers to attendance included a lack of knowledge of the services available, and a feeling that activities were aimed specifically at mothers.

Case study: Father's support

One SSCC has been very successful in engaging a significant number of fathers in their activities and events. The total number of male attendances at all activities increased from 354 in 2003 to 659 in 2004, a rise of 80%.

A crucial factor in achieving success in the area of father's work has been the close partnership working between the centre and a local voluntary agency for fathers. The agency supported the appointment, training and management of a part-time Father's Worker; and also delivered extensive staff training on the issue of engaging and working with fathers and male carers to the whole Sure Start team.

Men of different ages and from diverse family and employment backgrounds have been successfully involved in all levels – from attendance at activities, to membership of parenting groups and involvement in governing roles.

Important elements that have led to this successful working have been:

- ongoing and overt managerial commitment to the work;
- consistent use of a gender differentiated approach;
- the skills and abilities of the dedicated female Father's Worker, who has been vital in engaging men locally, strongly supported by a dual management structure;
- a cycle of consultation with fathers/male carers ensures that their needs and interests are met on an on-going basis; and
- the availability of specific father's events and the use of social marketing to attract men.

Source: adapted from Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidance (2006)

Best practice on engaging fathers can be found in the following publications...

- Fathers in Sure Start Local Programmes (August 2003)
- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)

Sources include: Fathers in Sure Start Local Programmes (August 2003), National Audit Office report: Sure Start Children's Centres (December 2006)

4.4 Joined up working and partnerships

Context

Delivering Sure Start Children's Centre services effectively requires a range of agencies and organisations – local authorities, health services, Jobcentre Plus, schools, the private, voluntary and community sectors and parents – to work together to plan and deliver services according to local needs. Working together in an integrated way has particular relevance to improving opportunities and reducing disadvantage.

Research

According to the National Audit Office report *Sure Start Children's Centres* centre managers and staff considered one of the main benefits of centres to be working with other organisations to deliver the services families needed. The report noted that establishing effective partnerships with health, social services and Jobcentre Plus could be demanding. Research available from NESS and other sources has also suggested that joined-up working can be a challenge and that, while progress is being made, there is still a long way to go.

Programmes which were particularly effective at multi-agency working had good support from their local authority in establishing shared service delivery and protocols, as well as multi-disciplinary staff training and meetings.

The main barriers to successful multi-agency working were that participation in partnerships was often seen as a burden. The demands were especially difficult to meet for small voluntary organisations, particularly where such organisations had few paid staff.

Another difficulty was that partnerships could be dominated by one member, most commonly the lead partner. Both statutory and voluntary sector partners often experienced conflicts of interest particularly when it was necessary to put their own interests aside to focus on the needs of the local programme area. Professionals could also find their identities threatened by changes in their traditional roles and responsibilities.

In less proficient programmes, there were examples of spaces designed for generic service delivery being re-assigned for single agency purposes. Where statutory and voluntary agencies were able to put aside their own interests and respond to the views of local people, partnerships worked well.

Front-line staff and managers widely reported enthusiasm for working in multi-disciplinary teams, despite the challenges involved. The overwhelming impression was of staff from a range of disciplines striving to increase their accessibility and welcoming the benefits of co-located working.

The nature of multi-agency working in programmes allowed services to be offered in good time to prevent difficulties developing, especially where children had additional needs and in safeguarding cases.

Sustaining the commitment to multi-agency working was dependent on strong leadership, a shared long-term vision of the benefits of joint working, an overall commitment to improving the life chances of children and recognition of the economic and social causes of disadvantage. In these areas roles and responsibilities were agreed and understood and protocols for responding to need were shared.

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Case study: Effective team-working

One SSCC has a multi-agency team of about 40 staff and covers a large geographical area, serving a community of around 1500 children under five and their families. Staff from a wide range of professional backgrounds are working together to deliver imaginative and innovative services to their community. There are community development workers, a health team comprising community midwife, two health co-ordinators and a speech and language development worker, as well as a family support team, a play development team, and childcare teams. The whole team has a shared sense of purpose and is strongly committed to the work they do with local families.

One scheme of which they are rightly proud is the 'trainee scheme' whereby parents take a work placement alongside the team and are supported by a mentor. A training and career plan is devised which leads over time to a qualification. Several trainees have progressed to employment and the rolling programme means more opportunities for more parents.

Source: adapted from Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidance (2006)

Best practice on partnership, collaboration and a multi-agency approach can be found in the following publications...

- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Improving the Employability of Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2004)
- Understanding the Contribution of Sure Start Local Programmes to the Task of Safeguarding Children’s Welfare (July 2007)
- Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007)
- Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children’s Centres (June 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005)
- Maternity Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005)
- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)
- Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2006)
- Ofsted: Extended Services in Schools and Children’s Centres (July 2006)

Sources include: Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005), Understanding Variations in Effectiveness Amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children’s Centres (June 2007), Understanding the Contribution of Sure Start Local Programmes to the Task of Safeguarding Children’s Welfare (July 2007), National Audit Office report: Sure Start Children’s Centres (December 2006), The Impact of Sure Start on Social Services (May 2005)

Changing area characteristics

It is difficult to use findings from the NESS reports on the characteristics of Sure Start Local Programmes to establish a clear picture of the ways in which programme areas have benefited from SSLPs since changes can often be attributed to a wide-range of factors. However, there are some overall observations that can be made. For a thorough discussion of the statistics and relevant caveats, see the full reports listed in the Sources section at the end.

In the first report in 2003 the following observations were made:

- Some of the worst deprivation in England was in Sure Start Local Programme areas.
- Almost half the children under four in Sure Start Local Programme areas lived in households where no-one was working, a figure nearly twice as high as the proportion in England.
- Young children in Sure Start areas experienced more health problems.
- Academic achievement in primary and secondary schools serving children resident in Sure Start Local Programme areas was lower than the average for England. There were also more attendance problems.
- Sure Start Local Programme areas suffered more crime than the national average.

Within the report published in 2007 the following observations were made:

- Over the five-year period studied improvements in SSLP areas were detected and often the level of change was significantly greater than that seen in England as a whole. However, few of these changes could be linked in a straightforward way to Sure Start activities.
- Some aspects of crime and disorder in SSLP areas had changed for the better, notably burglary from homes, vehicle crime, and exclusions and unauthorised absence from schools.
- Children from 11 upwards were demonstrating improved academic achievement, particularly when there were other Area Based Initiatives (ABIs) operating locally. The 2006 report observed that achievement in Key Stage 2 tests was higher than four years previously for children living in SSLP areas in English and mathematics (greater improvements than those seen in England). Although the rate was lower than that for England, the percentage of young people obtaining five or more GCSEs grade A*-C increased significantly with pupils from SSLP areas, compared to a lesser increase in England.
- There were improvements in child health (fewer emergency hospitalisations of 0 to 3 year olds for lower respiratory infections and severe injury). Other indicators for preventive health (i.e. the rate of breast-feeding or immunisations) were available for a small number of areas and suggested some gains.
- Less economic deprivation was being experienced by families with young children in SSLP areas in 2004/5 than five years earlier. The proportion of young children in SSLP areas in 'workless' households was significantly lower in 2004/5 than it was in 2000/1, representing a significantly greater reduction than in England overall.

For further details on relevant statistics see sources: Characteristics of Sure Start Local Programmes Rounds 1-4 (June 2003), Towards Understanding Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2004), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), Changes in the Characteristics of Sure Start Local Programme areas 2000/2001 to 2002/2003 (July 2005), Changes in Characteristics of SSLP Areas between 2000/01 and 2003/04 (July 2006), Changes in the Characteristics of SSLP Areas between 2000/01 and 2004/05 (June 2007)

4.5 Health

Context

Sure Start Children's Centres aim to increase access to health services by engaging with families who, traditionally, have been unwilling or unable to take up services, delivering them in a way that better meets their needs. SSCCs have a key role to play in delivering the Child Health Promotion Programme and health related services provide a clear opportunity to make sure children get the best possible start in life.

Research

It is difficult to determine clear-cut evidence of the effectiveness of SSLPs with regards to health. In the NESS *Early Impacts Report* (Nov 2005) only a few small effects were detected that could not necessarily be specifically related to health. However there had been a reduction, greater than in England, in emergency hospitalisations for 0-3 year olds for severe injury or respiratory infection, as well as increases in health screening, and, within a small proportion of programme areas with relevant data, there was a significant increase in the percentage of immunisations recorded as completed by ages 1-2 (with no comparable change in the percentage of children immunised in England as a whole).

The most recent research available from NESS, *The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning* (March 2008), supports these early observations, identifying that children living in SSLP areas, as compared with children in non-SSLP areas seen 2 years earlier, are more likely to have received the recommended immunisations and are less likely to have had an accident based injury in the year preceding assessment (as caution is warranted in interpreting these findings, because the differences could have been due to a general improvement over time, please see full report for more details).

Health visitors and midwives were extremely important to programmes, particularly in terms of making initial contact with families. Home visiting, ante-natal services, access to specialists and services for children and parents with special needs were regarded as the most important health services.

Programmes had improved access to maternity provision by delivering them in new places and in new ways. They had also created special services to meet the needs of particular groups of people. The extra investment Sure Start had made in maternity services enabled staff to spend more time and develop relationships with women, especially those who needed the most support. Good team-working between midwives and health visitors assisted the smooth handover of women between the antenatal and postnatal periods.

The most widespread health-related intervention offered by programmes was breastfeeding advice and support. From the small amount of information available, there is an indication that the rate of breastfeeding has risen significantly within some programme areas (though tends to remain still below the rate in England overall). Many women also benefited from gaining related training and by acting as peer supporters, with some using this as a springboard to further training. Many programmes recognised that they had not reached some of the most vulnerable families and this was connected in some cases to issues around data sharing by some mainstream services. However, some SSLPs had made contact with women previously unknown to

mainstream services. Health was also the service that most often provided a gateway to other facilities and a way of contacting families with complex needs.

Smoking cessation and healthy eating advice were highly important aspects of almost every programme. The majority of programmes studied also provided home safety equipment to parents, although much fewer offered home safety checks or monitored housing quality.

Staff reported high levels of job satisfaction in relation to health and enjoyed the chance to build close relationships with users and to be creative and innovative.

While there was often a lack of hard evidence to prove the benefits of health-related services, practitioners themselves felt confident that they fulfilled the Sure Start aim of giving children a better start in life.

Case study: A maternity outreach programme

- Core service: all families with someone who is newly pregnant living in the area are visited at home early in the pregnancy by the maternity outreach worker. They provide information on local services and offer support with parenting education, information about 'Bumps and Babies' groups, infant feeding and referrals to appropriate agencies such as the smoking cessation service and infant mental health team.
- Vulnerable/socially excluded women are offered individually tailored support as agreed with the community midwife and health visitor.
- All families are offered a further home visit just before the baby is due and just after the birth.
- All teenage parents are now allocated a maternity outreach worker wherever they live.
- A reward scheme is being piloted to encourage teenage mothers to access antenatal and postnatal care and a range of other services such as drop-in groups, breastfeeding support and smoking cessation. The scheme also has the advantage of keeping the maternity team informed of teenage parents' latest addresses, as the vouchers are posted to them.

Source: adapted from Delivering Health Services through Sure Start Children's Centres – Department of Health (June 2007)

Best practice on health related issues can be found in the following publications...

- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007)
- Maternity Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005)
- A Better Start: Children And Families with Special Needs and Disabilities in Sure Start Local Programmes (March 2007)

Sources include: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start (June 2002), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth study Part One (January 2005), Implementing Sure Start Local programmes: An in-depth study Part Two (January 2005), Changes in the Characteristics of Sure Start Local Programme Areas 2000/2001 to 2002/2003 (July 2005), Maternity Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005), Mini Sure Start Local Programmes: An Overview of their Early Implementation (January 2005), The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning (March 2008)

4.6 Governance, leadership and consultation

Context

Governance arrangements for Sure Start Children's Centres should bring together all the parties needed to facilitate a multi-agency approach and should challenge the centre to constantly improve its performance. Parents should be included in formal governance arrangements. Sure Start Local Programmes were particularly good at engaging parents and it is important that this is carried forward into Sure Start Children's Centres, and that all parents have the chance to be involved. Given the wide-variety of services on offer, the complex needs of local children and families, and the diverse staff in place, charismatic and visionary leadership is integral to the effective running of SSCCs.

Research

According to *Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres* (Jan 2006), successful management arrangements should be unified, participative, trust-based, accessible, decisive, supportive, co-ordinated, joined-up and standardised. The National Audit Office (NAO) report *Sure Start Children's Centres* makes clear the important role which LAs should have as a part of this successful management structure, supporting SSCCs driving forward change. It states that LAs also need to acknowledge that no decision should be taken unilaterally. At the time of the NAO examination, centres and LAs had largely focused their energies on establishing new centres with less attention given to performance and financial monitoring and to governance. There was also a wide-variety of approaches to management, though the majority of centres either already included parents on the Board or intended to in future. Parental involvement was seen as critical to ensuring that services were tailored to local need.

Trust and goodwill were thought by many consultees to be at the root of effective governance. Management and delivery staff both cited committed individuals with a common vision as being central to good governance and that governors should feel valued and integral to the SSCCs development

Within the research available, designing, managing and delivering SSLPs is seen as a complex task which requires a good manager. According to the NESS research 'good' (or well-liked) programme managers were supportive, flexible, approachable and motivated, with high professional standards and a sensitivity to different professional cultures. They also needed to maintain a constant focus on all stakeholders in the partnership. *Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres* highlights the importance of recruiting the "right person for the job" with respondents reporting that the attributes they desired most in a programme manager were partnership working ability, an ability to engage communities, charisma and visionary leadership.

Further, the research highlights that having an effective manager in place can be pivotal to the success of a programme. Where strong leadership and good management had been sustained over time, SSLPs were functioning more effectively and demonstrating better outcomes. In addition staff felt committed to making the SSLP work where their own professional/personal needs were also acknowledged and where they could rely on a regular pattern of supervision and appraisal. In most centres, the centre manager had been responsible for the shape of the evolving centre, managerial decisions and initiating partnership development and this strong leadership was seen as important in maintaining the centre's drive and vision.

The requirement to consult with parents and the local community was very well observed, and while programmes recognised its importance, it brought with it challenges, especially in terms of the time and expertise needed to carry out effective consultation, ensuring a sufficient proportion of parents were consulted (and involving all groups of parents) and making the link between consultation and the participation of parents on the partnership board or planning groups.

The earlier NESS research shows that the level of parental involvement within SSLPs was generally high, though much greater amongst mothers. Programmes varied in their attitudes to working with parents with some keen for them to take on a genuine role within the programme's management structures, and others seeing their role as more consultative. Some parents felt prevented from becoming involved in partnership boards and their equivalents due to factors including the use of jargon and acronyms, the perceived levels of bureaucracy, community divisions and a sense in some programmes that the statutory and voluntary agencies had already set the agenda.

Case study: Aiding parental involvement within Advisory Board structures

A centre has established an induction procedure for all parents involved with the Board in order to increase their confidence and involvement. The induction includes a number of development days which cover issues like breaking barriers, getting rid of jargon, how to take minutes and understanding the format of meetings.

Before each Board meeting, the centre holds a 'pre-Board meeting' for parents only, to provide an opportunity to look at the agenda and minutes, and to talk them through. The Chair of the Board is a local parent which provides further reassurance for the other parents. Having gained confidence from the experience, the Chair has now trained to be a childminder.

Source: adapted from Improving the Employability of Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes – NESS (June 2004)

Best practice on topics in this area can be found in the following publications...

- **Quality:** 'A Checklist for Good Quality Services' – The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005)
- **On financial management and resources:** National Audit Office: Sure Start Children's Centres (December 2006)
- **On consultation:** Buildings in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2005)
- Understanding Variations in Effectiveness Amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children's Centres (June 2007)
- **And on management more generally:** Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (January 2005)
- Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children's Centres (June 2007)
- Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres (January 2006)
- Cost Effectiveness of Implementing SSLPs: An Interim Report (February 2006)
- Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (2006)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005)
- Ofsted: Extended Services in Schools and Children's Centres (July 2006)

Sources include: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start (June 2002), Getting Sure Start Started (August 2002), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005), Buildings in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2005), National Audit Office report: Sure Start Children's Centres (December 2006), Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres (January 2006), Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)

4.7 Workforce

Context

A core challenge for Sure Start Children's Centres is establishing and managing a strong multi-agency team which maximises the benefits of a broad knowledge and skills base. Centres with a dedicated and motivated staff who have embraced the Sure Start vision will quickly notice the benefits this has on morale and quality and, in turn, on the children and families which use the centre.

Research

The research shows that staffing Sure Start Local Programmes could be a complex task for managers. Staff from diverse backgrounds working in teams comprising professional and non-professionals could be difficult. A varied programme of work involving a range of different targets and services spanning health, education, special needs and family support could also make it difficult to find and employ the right mix of staff. There could also be tension where professionals had to re-interpret their role to fit into multi-professional teams, and some anxiety where staff felt parts of their jobs were being done by others who did not necessarily have their qualifications. Staff working in both an SSLP and a 'home' organisation could face conflicting management pressures and loyalties.

The NESS research highlights the importance of ensuring staff with the appropriate qualifications are employed to take on specialist roles, and that when asked to take on new responsibilities, staff are given adequate training to be able to do so. One particular example where staff may need additional training is with regards facilitating children's speech and language development since all staff need to be aware of the importance of the language environment (talking to infants, responding to them quickly) in order for children's language to improve. An investment in CPD also shows a commitment to the needs of staff, as well as to the needs of users. Joint training sessions for different members of multi-disciplinary teams have been found to be particularly effective. High-quality staff who feel confident and able to perform their roles are an essential element in ensuring that the needs of children and families are successfully met.

According to *Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres* differentials in salary and terms of employment due to both professional difference, and differences between public, private and voluntary sectors, were common. However, programmes had worked hard to avoid this causing resentment among staff, through strong leadership, focusing on the benefits of change, and establishing respect and shared values between different professions.

There remained examples though where the workforce was not sufficient in size or skill to meet the complex needs of their community. While the gender and ethnicity of workers were important factors in the extent to which communities engaged with the programmes, this could be difficult to achieve where there were limited numbers of staff available.

Despite these challenges, reports within NESS point to a committed and resourceful staff base from a range of agencies that are enthusiastic about the Sure Start way of working.

Case study: Empowering staff

A staff training event was geared towards generating a 'code of practice' for outreach work. The centre leader introduced the task and asked staff members to move into designated small groups facilitated by a more experienced staff member or area coordinator. The groups discussed their actual outreach practice as well as working through a number of scenarios. The groups put all their ideas on a large piece of paper, which was fed back to the main group. The following discussion went through all the issues with the centre leader giving some firm guidelines on expectations of the outreach workers. Some conflicting points of view were aired in the small groups but discussed at large in an anonymous way.

There was a sense that staff felt listened to and actively involved in the process of generating a code of conduct and that reflection on practice and assumptions became ingrained. Staff also appreciated regular feedback sessions and support for their role in the programme. This was mainly offered in the form of supervision support for new members of staff or consultation and opportunities for training.

Source: adapted from Empowering Parents in Sure Start Local Programmes – NESS (November 2006)

Best practice on workforce related topics can be found in the following publications...

- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)
- Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes (January 2005)
- Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children's Centres (June 2007)
- Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005)
- Family and Parenting Support in Sure Start Local Programmes (July 2007)
- Maternity Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2006)
- Ofsted: Extended Services in Schools and Children's Centres (July 2006)

Sources include: Getting Sure Start Started (August 2002), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years (November 2005), Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children's Centres (June 2007), Sure Start Local Programmes and Domestic Abuse (July 2007), Research to Inform the Management and Governance of Children's Centres (January 2006), Ofsted: How well are they doing?: The impact of Children's Centres and Extended Schools (Jan 2008)

Chapter 5: Successes and challenges

The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning (March 2008), provides the most up-to-date information available on the successes made on the journey so far, and the areas which require our further collective attention.

The evaluation has found that SSLPs have made a positive impact on 7 of the 14 outcomes investigated for three-year olds and their families. This is a marked improvement on the findings of the earlier cross-sectional study published in 2005, particularly because the data *“provides almost no evidence of adverse effects of SSLPs”*.

The report concludes that it is plausible that the differences in findings reflect actual changes in the impact of SSLPs, likely to be a result of the increased quality of provision, greater focus on reaching the most disadvantaged, the move to SSCCs, and also greater exposure of children and families, as well as staff, to services. This is good news, and provides evidence of the real benefits which SSCCs are already having for children and families.

The report also provides us with very useful lessons for the future development of policy. For example, the results show that SSCCs have not, as yet, had a demonstrable positive impact on young children’s language development. While it is reasonable to assume that bringing about change in this area will take more time to become apparent, it is also clear that more work is needed to engage both parents and children’s centre staff in promoting children’s speech and language development. This should be a priority for SSCCs in developing their services. All staff need to have the skills and understanding required for high-quality, responsive interaction with children. SSCCs need to be providing parents with the information and support in developing their children’s speech and language skills.

i. Successes

More generally, the overall successes and challenges documented within the range of research reports can be summarised as follows.

- There is widespread support for the philosophy of Sure Start.
- NESS data has revealed a high level of satisfaction and enthusiasm on the part of parents who lived in Sure Start Local Programme areas and who had come into contact, on either a shorter or longer term basis, with the SSLP. This high-level of confidence and trust encourages parents to use services and to spread the word.
- There is a high level of interaction between Sure Start and other Government initiatives.
- SSLPs that were proficient in implementing and delivering their programmes were more able to have positive effects on the children and families living in their areas. As such the proficiency with which the whole model is implemented has a direct bearing on effectiveness.

- There is strong evidence that good progress is being made towards developing the kinds of services parents want and need and that parents have a strong voice in shaping them.
- Programme managers felt the flexibility of Sure Start was a key element in the successful delivery of the programme after approval of the final delivery plan.
- Amongst the NESS research there is evidence of SSLPs that have developed some exemplary services, and have made incremental improvements to many services.
- The targeting of Sure Start Local Programmes has been effective in that they can be found in areas that are home to many of the poorest children aged 0 to 3 years and their families in England.
- According to Ofsted the majority of settings provided good or better services, integrating care and education very effectively. Almost all the sample were effective in meeting the range of needs of children, young people and adults in the local community and were committed strongly to providing inclusive services.

According to the National Audit Office report *Sure Start Children's Centres*, some of the key successes and benefits of SSCCs as outlined by centre managers were:

- partnership working
- impact on children and families
- a feeling of being part of the community
- the opportunity to work in new and creative ways
- a continuity of service in one place which increased accessibility.

ii. Challenges

- It has taken longer than expected for Sure Start programmes to develop their full range of services.
- It is challenging and time consuming to join-up and work in partnership with other agencies and providers.
- Sure Start programmes operate in extremely complex areas where many other initiatives operate and this exacerbates the issues around collaborative working for most programmes.
- There are anxieties in some programmes over the need to monitor performance and to feedback on progress. However developing a systematic approach to reviewing performance is an essential part of improving the overall quality of centres. In the early stages, few programmes demonstrated enough proficiency in systematically monitoring, analysing and responding to patterns of service use. Ofsted agreed that SSLPs tended not to evaluate sufficiently the impact of services on users, although awareness of the need to do so had increased. More evaluation of value for money and cost-benefits were also needed and LAs needed to support SSCCs in monitoring exercises. SSCCs need to demonstrate a clear understanding that through performance management and monitoring they will obtain the information necessary to constantly improve their services.
- There is a need for centres to improve work with families and children to enrich the language development of children. This work needs to be from birth onwards and all staff and parents need to be aware of the need for frequent language stimulation for all children.

According to the National Audit Office report *Sure Start Children's Centres*, some of the key challenges and concerns for centres as outlined by centre managers were:

- sustainability and funding
- multi-agency/multi-disciplinary working
- evaluation/monitoring
- recruiting and retaining staff
- coping with change
- concerns that there may be a change in the agenda
- outreach.

It is clear that there is much more work which needs to be done, both centrally, and at a local level, on outreach, on targeting those in disadvantage and on engaging the hard to reach, as well as on motivating fathers to get involved. Centres should be looking to constantly improve their offer and will need to ensure they have effective performance management systems in place to be able to do this. A greater focus is needed on planning, monitoring and evaluation, and on initiatives to strengthen child development, with specific regard to improving speech and language. All of this will need to be underpinned by strong and visionary leadership, supported by a diverse staff that possess the appropriate skills, and have access to training, which allows them to work effectively. Above all, staff need to be aware and engaged with the outcomes which the centre is looking to achieve, and to be committed to the pursuit of these goals.

Since SSCCs have a pivotal role to play within the Government's strategy to address child poverty, facilitate opportunities for all and improve community regeneration, it is essential that we take on-board these challenges and learn from them to develop the most effective services possible.

Best practice in relation to overcoming these challenges can be found in the following publications...

- Understanding the Contribution of Sure Start Local Programmes to the Task of Safeguarding Children’s Welfare (July 2007)
- Sure Start and Black and Minority Ethnic Populations (June 2007)
- Outreach and Home Visiting Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2006)
- Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007)

Sources include: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start (June 2002), Getting Sure Start Started (August 2002), Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth Study (January 2005), Early Findings on the Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Child Development and Family Functioning: Report of the Cross-sectional study of 9 and 36 month old Children and their Families (November 2005), The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Child Development And Family Functioning (March 2008), Understanding Variations in Effectiveness amongst Sure Start Local Programmes: Lessons for Sure Start Children’s Centres (June 2007), National Audit Office report: Sure Start Children’s Centres (December 2006), Ofsted: Extended Services in Schools and Children’s Centres (July 2006), Ofsted: How well are they doing?: The impact of Children’s Centres and Extended Schools (Jan 2008), Promoting Speech and Language – A Themed Study in 15 Sure Start Local Programmes (June 2007), The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes (November 2005), Characteristics of Sure Start Local Programmes Rounds 1-4 (June 2003), Variation in Sure Start Local Programmes’ Effectiveness: Report of the NESS Programme Variability Study (November 2005),

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Moving the journey forwards

Moving the journey forwards: taking on board the messages from research

It is a powerful feature of the development of Sure Start that the influence of research findings on policy and then, in turn, on evidence-based practice, has been so strong. The comprehensive nature of the NESS, as well as the timing of research findings, has meant that up-to-date evidence has been available to feed in throughout the development of Sure Start, helping shape both the overall programme, as well as shedding light on particular areas of practice in need of improvement. The following section discusses just a few of the areas where research findings have clearly fed into policy development.

Children's Development

SSCCs have a critical role to play in improving outcomes for all children, and in particular, ensuring that the most disadvantaged children benefit from a good start in life. High-quality early years provision, together with support for parents to enable their children to learn and develop well, will help prevent gaps growing up between disadvantaged children and their better off peers. It is vital that Sure Start Children's Centres realise their potential for maximising a positive impact on children's development and make continuous improvement in this goal their central mission. Promoting children's speech and language development is especially critical to enabling them to learn well in school. All staff in centres need to understand the importance of providing a language-rich environment, and have the skills and understanding to be able to interact well with young children.

Parents

Involving parents in the planning and delivery of SSCC services is one of the best ways of ensuring engagement with families and encouraging take-up of services, including by those who traditionally have shunned statutory services. Sure Start Local Programmes were recognised as being effective in doing this. We have seen the benefits of this engagement, to the centre, to fathers as well as mothers, and ultimately to children, and because of this we are determined to make sure parents have their say in how services are planned and delivered. It is important to recognise though that successful parental engagement comes in many different forms, and very much needs to be tailored to individual parents. Some parents are more confident and can get engaged in a centre's advisory board; others can be engaged through thoughtful, sympathetic consultation including through parent forums; whilst for some, especially those in hard to reach groups, the process of engagement starts through individual discussion and outreach, gradually building their trust and involvement.

Leadership

Evidence has been used to shape the development and inform the national roll-out of SSCCs, showing that strong, effective leadership is central to success while also maintaining links with the community and all parents who use services. This balance is critical. Government now provides, through the National College of School Leaders, high-quality professional training in the role of SSCC manager through the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). To date over 700 managers have taken this course. We will be establishing new networks for SSCC leaders to facilitate the same peer-group support and sharing of advice that is a feature of other professional groups across the public sector.

Outreach

NESS findings highlighted the need for improved outreach work and support for the hardest to reach, the most vulnerable parts of the community. Government has responded with measures including funding for an additional two outreach workers in centres serving the most disadvantaged communities, as well as producing guidance for SSCCs and LAs on outreach and providing best practice. In addition, we committed in the Children's Plan to undertake a review of outreach, including in SSCCs, with a view to developing core principles and standards for outreach services to meet the diverse needs of different families and communities and support this with training materials and courses.

Learning from the most effective

Further evidence on what makes an SSLP effective became available in 2006 with the publication of the *Understanding Variations in Effectiveness Report*. This report took key dimensions of proficiency and looked at the characteristics of those programmes that performed well in the 2005 Impact Study compared to those that did not. This evidence provided key learning for Government and SSLPs on how the most effective SSLPs operated. Building on this and the National Audit Office report *Sure Start Children's Centres*, the Government has issued Performance Management guidance, developed a self evaluation form for SSCCs, thereby supporting LAs in embedding performance management practices and processes to improve the performance of all centres.

More is to come. The gradual development of the evidence base and the contribution it has made to the improvement of SSLPs and, more recently, SSCCs has been vital. This process of evaluation and feedback is set to continue. Further analysis will be undertaken on the current Impact Study data. There will be a report on cost effectiveness and the Impact Study will continue, with the next report on five year-old children and their families. In addition, the DCSF is also set to commission further work to evaluate the current national roll out of SSCCs. The first findings from this work are expected in late 2008.

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Working together to deliver the vision for 21st Century Children's Services

Sure Start Children's Centres have a crucial role to play in improving children's outcomes, in tackling child poverty and inequality and in improving lives in every community in the country. We know that in order to achieve this we must provide high-quality support and services to children from their earliest years, a commitment we have re-iterated within the Children's Plan. We must invest early, in time and money and energy, to make achieving these outcomes a reality. And as child poverty has a detrimental effect on society as a whole, tackling it needs to be something with which we are all involved.

Taking forward the development of SSCCs requires us, collectively, to recognise the challenges which face us and overcome them. This document has shown that embedding evidence-based practice and responding positively to evidence is the cornerstone to achieving the best possible outcomes for children and their families. Findings from NESS will continue to guide this process. We remain committed to using the future results provided by NESS, and other research, to advance the policy and to highlight the areas which need our particular attention. Importantly, individual centres and LAs must also develop a greater sense of what is happening locally, supported by clear, systematic approaches to measuring the impact of their work on children and families. The findings from this work then need to be built upon to ensure maximum success.

We know to achieve this will take commitment and effective leadership, a wider objective which we also detail in the Children's Plan. It needs centre managers, supported by LAs, to establish a rigorous and systematic approach to planning and evaluation. It requires effective outreach to ensure that all families, particularly the disadvantaged, can take the full advantage of services, and also that once parents come through the front door, services keep them engaged. It requires a proactive and pragmatic approach to responding to the needs identified by research, and by users, and responsiveness in taking forward the new work necessary.

We are now moving into the final phase of the Sure Start programme, with a commitment to put in place a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community by 2010. There is much success to build on, as well as lessons to learn from previous experience. We will ensure that national policy is actively informed by ongoing research, and that findings are regularly communicated to managers and practitioners in local agencies and centres. We look to you locally to act on these findings in your own centres so that, together, we can deliver the vision for 21st Century Children's Services encapsulated within the Children's Plan and improve outcomes for all children and families. We know that in order to meet the needs and aspirations of children and families, they deserve nothing less.

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Resources

The following publications can be downloaded from www.surestart.gov.uk and ordered from DCSF Publications, dcsf@prolog.uk.com, Tel: 0845 6022260

- Governance Guidance for Sure Start Children's Centres and Extended Schools (Published May 2007)
- Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidance (Revised November 2006)
- Sure Start Children's Centres Planning and Performance Management Guidance (Updated November 2006)
- Sure Start Children's Centres: Phase 3 Planning and Delivery Guidance (Published November 2007)

The following publications can be downloaded from the Together for Children website www.childrens-centres.org

- Together For Children's Toolkit for Reaching Priority and Excluded Families
- Supporting the Successful Delivery of Rural Children's Centres
- Working with the Private, Voluntary and Independent Sector
- Improving Health and Local Authority Joint Working
- Business Planning Toolkit

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